

writing, or on television—are also an *auratic* phenomenon which are attached to an absent center, which link it inextricably to tradition, granting a particular shape to space and time, mediating distance, taking place by “coming into hiding,” which is to say by being cast into the undecidable abyss of representations. Reproduction is knowable; through reproduction, distance is overcome, revelation is secured, attaching itself as an *auratic* supplement to (potentially) every place in the world. Every thing is a sign, evidence by its very presence, of the “handwriting of god.”<sup>¶</sup> Perhaps it is within such a framework that we must finally place the question of faith, setting it in relation to a series of terms: *aura*, *frame*, *shadow*, *echo*, *parergon*, *trace*, *archive*, *contingency*, *phantasm*—a succession of words which trace the difference between present and absent, visible and invisible, hidden and revealed. Faith is auratic; it circumscribes and subsumes all things *in potentia*; anything might be cast as evidence of an absent cause, a hidden meaning, an abyssal structure, or nonexistent, lost, or inaccessible origin/al. To this we might add another term: *apocalyptic*, which reveals only the presence, or given-ness, of the inaccessible, as a *promise*.

New York/Brussels

I am what I can look at. What I admire judges me.

—JEAN-LUC MARION

For over twenty years, the French phenomenologist Jean-Luc Marion, best known in the United States for his debate with Derrida about the nature of the gift and the Name, has investigated the conjunction of theology and art. He has argued that painting, because of its “exceptional visibility,” is “a privileged case of the phenomenon and therefore one possible route to a consideration of phenomenality in general.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, painting can help us solve some of the major problems of modern philosophy. In almost the same breath, he states that theology is “an indisputable authority [*instance*] concerning any theory of painting.”<sup>2</sup> If painting presents the royal road to the phenomenon and thus to that approach to philosophy called phenomenology, theology gives the law to painting.<sup>¶</sup> In the discussion that follows, I will invert the question that seems to motivate Marion. I am not asking whether painting can tell us something about philosophy, but rather whether theology can tell us something about painting. To cut to the conclusion: Marion’s discussion of painting recognizes something very interesting in modernism, but ultimately misreads the reasons for what James Elkins has called “the strange place of religion in contemporary art.”<sup>3</sup> Over the course of three books and a number of articles,<sup>4</sup> Marion has tried to show that Continental philosophy after Husserl has unnecessarily and unjustifiably limited itself. Instead of allowing each of the things of this world to appear “as it gives itself out to be,” phenomenology has tethered those things to both the perceiving “I” and to the horizon within which they

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans James K.A. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) ix.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>3</sup> See James Elkins, *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Marion sums up this project, pursued in his trilogy, *Réduction et Donation* (1989), *Étant Donnée* (Being Given) (1997) and *De Surcroît* (In Excess) (2001), in his essay “Saturated Phenomena,” *Philosophy Today* 40:1 (1996) 103–125.

appear to that “I.” The phenomenon does not stand on its own and as its own justification. It is conditioned and justified by the viewer and by the concepts (“Being,” “History,” etc.) that the viewer imposes.¶ Marion suggests that phenomenology admit the possibility that some phenomena can escape servitude to concepts and therefore escape being held hostage by the person experiencing them. By their sheer excessiveness, such “saturated” phenomena overwhelm the “I’s” attempts to peg them down and understand them. They spill over their own and the viewer’s boundaries and thus go beyond mere imminence. In his books, Marion divides such transcending phenomena into four types: the historical event, the idol, the flesh and the icon.<sup>5</sup> But in his 1996 essay, “Saturated Phenomena,” Marion brackets together the flesh and the icon in order to make room for a fourth type that makes his purpose clear: The fourth type of saturated phenomenon is theophany, the manifestation of the divine, that is, the self-revelation of God.<sup>6</sup>¶ Painting inhabits the crossing of Marion’s religious and phenomenological concerns. It stands as the saturated phenomenon *par excellence*, and it appears to be able to serve as either icon or idol. These types are central to Marion’s most famous theological work, *God Without Being*, and play important roles in his explicitly phenomenological texts. The icon and the idol are “two figures of appearance, inverted, opposed, but nevertheless indispensable and inseparable.”<sup>7</sup>¶ The problem with the idol—and the term should signal that the idol is essentially, because theologically, problematic—does not lie with the fact that it is the work of human hands. Rather, the idol is suspect because it captures the human eye; it casts its spell over the gaze. Even when the idol aspires to the divine, “it ceases to transpierce visible things, in order to pause in the splendor of one of them.”<sup>8</sup> It stops being a medium and is transformed into a fixed and fixating end. At best, the idol marks a dangerously permanent detour into the sheer immanence of sight.¶ Painting presents a *summa* of the

5 See Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) 221–33 and Jean-Luc Marion, *In Excess*, trans. Robyn Horner and Vincent Berraud (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002) 30–124.

6 Jean-Luc Marion, “Saturated Phenomena.”

7 *The Crossing of the Visible* ix.

8 Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) 10–11.

visible. For all practical purposes and in each of its instances, it temporarily abolishes the unseen—that which cannot be seen and that which has yet to be seen (*l'inou*). Marion writes that “the painting carries presence, to the point of bearing even absence (*appresentation*) to direct visibility.”<sup>9</sup> We can see examples of such *appresentation* in those Cezannes that reproduce their object matter from several vantage points, or in those Cubist works that show, as if in the same plane, all sides and aspects of their objects. This insistence on thick visual presence lends the painting its idolatrous glory. Through the sheer radiance of its illusion, its surface and its semblance (and here Marion constantly puns on that essential word of Schiller’s and Nietzsche’s aesthetics, *Schein*, which means, of course, both semblance *and* radiance), the painting-idol compels the viewer’s admiration. We admire, according to Marion (following Pascal), not the painting’s original, its model, but the painting itself.<sup>10</sup> We are entranced by what lies immediately before us, by all that we can see.¶ What we see, though, is an invisible—that is, unconscious—mirror of our own desires. Marion’s argument here is gnomic, complicated and bears quotation:

My idol defines what I can bear of phenomenality, the maximum of intuitive intensity that I can endure . . . In this way my idol exposes the span of all my aims—what I set my heart on seeing, and thus also want to see and do. In short, it denudes my desire and my hope. What I look at that is visible decides who I am. I am what I can look at. What I admire judges me.<sup>11</sup>

The idol shows us how much visual intensity we can stand and enjoy because, according to Marion, our enjoyment is pitched to the maximum intensity we can stand. We want to look at that which provides the maximum tolerable sensation. This intensity seems to shade over into content (the theme of the idol, what it is about) so that Marion can claim that the idol reveals both *how intensely* and *what* we want to see. This

<sup>9</sup> *In Excess* 66.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 59–61.

<sup>11</sup> *In Excess* 60; see also *God Without Being* 11–3.

shift from *how much* to *what* is awkward, but Marion's moral point is clear. The idol reveals nothing more than our narcissistic solipsism. What I admire limits me, shows me what my limits are. It renders me up to the immanence of my desire.<sup>12</sup> ¶ As an idol, the painting (or, Marion indicates, any work of visual art) is a saturated phenomenon because its display of the visible, its overwhelming visuality, exceeds any final conceptual recuperation. You cannot pin it down but have to keep going back to it again and again. Its concrete intensity defeats and thus transcends abstract thought, but this transcendence does not deliver it from the realm of sheer immanence, from what merely *is*. ¶ Marion's theology makes all the difference here because he has argued strenuously since the early 1980s that the equation of God with Being is nothing more than a form of intellectual idolatry. It marks human understanding's attempt to circumscribe the divine within the limits of the concept. God does not *need* to be. Rather, God is transcendent and precedes Being both temporally and logically. To remain within the realm of Being, then, is to remain within the bonds of immanence. And the idol is most resolutely about Being. ¶ It is here that icon, which is locked "in mutual antagonism" with the idol,<sup>13</sup> comes into play. While the icon does not share the idol's full visual glory, it suffers none of its deficiencies. It does not mirror the spectator's gaze, as the idol does, because it does not rest with what can be offered up to sight (both the seen and *l'inou*). Rather, it aspires to the invisible. Indeed, Marion claims that it becomes the "visible mirror of the invisible."<sup>14</sup> What could this mean? ¶ Marion clearly has in mind the traditional icons we associate with the Orthodox Church, although he clearly does not want to limit himself to these. Nevertheless, Marion's notion of the icon must include a face in some way, so that it can initiate a complicated and all-important exchange of gazes:

[I]t always shows a gaze belonging to a human face. . . . [P]ainted at the center of the icon, and ascribed to a saint, the Virgin or Christ, this gaze looks at, outside of the icon and in front of it, the believer who is taken through the icon to the saint, the Virgin or Christ. The gaze looks at the one who, praying, raises his gaze toward the icon: the painted gaze invisibly responds to the invisible gaze of the one in prayer; and transfigures its own visibility by including it in the commerce of two invisible gazes—the one from a praying man, taken through the painted icon, to look upon an invisible saint, the other the gaze of the invisible saint covered with benevolence, visible through the painted icon, looking upon the one in prayer.<sup>15</sup>

The icon assumes but cannot depict the viewer's veneration. While on a totally literal level, the icon *does* present a benevolent gaze back at the viewer—after all, the saint/Virgin/Christ is looking out at us—Marion clearly wants us to understand the icon as a translucent *medium* through which the saint/Virgin/Christ in some way do *actually* look on. The icon is a screen that stages an exchange between two invisible presences: the addressor and the addressee of prayer. It achieves transcendence by escaping both the imminence of sight and the imminence of human desire. While the icon stages God's love in both the subjective and the objective genitive, it is the former—God's love for His creation—that precedes and initiates the transaction. ¶ You can see what Marion is getting at if you compare an icon—any icon—with Manet's *Olympia* (Musée d'Orsay). While Manet's painting surely and explicitly invokes its (male) viewer who is the object, of course, of Olympia's cool and unimpressed stare, we look back *at*, not *through* her. She is thus an idol, not an icon, because it is her visible presence, not the invisible, that captivates us. In the icon, "the visible surface must paradoxically efface itself, or at least efface within it every opacity which would obfuscate the crossing of gazes: the icon dulls the image in it, in order to there prevent

<sup>15</sup> *The Crossing of the Visible* 20.

<sup>12</sup> "[T]he idol provokes an ineluctable solipsism . . . The sequence of gazes that I continually pose on the idol establish so many invisible mirrors of myself, it therefore describes or conceptualizes it less than it designates a temporality where it is first an issue of my ipseity." *Being Given* 230.

<sup>13</sup> *God Without Being* 3.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 20–22.



any self-sufficiency, autonomy, or self-affirmation.<sup>16</sup> *Olympia* enacts precisely this opacity. Its fame rests on precisely this “self-sufficiency, autonomy, or self-affirmation.”<sup>17</sup> Marion’s account of the icon restores the context and thus the uncanny and somewhat unnerving power of a more contemporary idol—Warhol’s *Gold Marilyn Monroe* (Museum of Modern Art). This painting apes the icons of Warhol’s own Byzantine Catholic youth through its use of gold and through its flattened, dulled and disembodied rendition of the dead star’s face. Though Warhol goes a long way towards stripping Marilyn’s image of its autonomy, this painting is not an icon in Marion’s sense. Marilyn cannot see those who come to venerate her because the presupposition of the painting—its pathos—rests with the fact that she *is* famously dead. The only gaze that can be said to return from that empyrean beyond the canvas is *not* hers, but a more abstract and not particularly benevolent presence, like Publicity or Capital.<sup>18</sup> On a more prosaic but more fundamental level, though, neither the *Olympia* nor the *Gold Marilyn Monroe* can be an icon because neither serves prayer. The icon, Marion tells us, “supports the pigments less by the wood of its plank than by the liturgical and oratory exchange of gazes that meet one another here.”<sup>17</sup> This is an odd but telling figure. The literal support of the icon—the wood plank—is less important, is less of a support than the ecclesiastical context in which the icon appears. What are we to make of this? The icon is therefore an icon in no small part because of the liturgy that surrounds it, that ensures that gazes are truly exchanged through it. Because this exchange is the icon’s most important aspect, the icon does not have to be a painting or a work of art. In fact, while Marion sees a distinct and important difference between the icon and the Eucharist,<sup>18</sup> he establishes a close contact between the Eucharistic liturgy and the icon that can easily shade into a conflation of the two.<sup>19</sup> It is very easy for a painting to be an idol. But is it possible for a painter—a contemporary painter—

to fashion an icon? Take the case of Mark Rothko. His later work “holds itself erect opposite us; better, the visible that saturates it and without which it could not rise up from itself overflows on us.”<sup>20</sup> This overflow allows the painting to pass beyond the bounds of the conceptual. Nevertheless, Rothko’s paintings remain idols, because they display nothing but the visible on their surfaces, “without withdrawal, emptiness or depth.”<sup>21</sup> They are thus trapped within the imminent. Marion elaborates on this point by noting Rothko’s commitment to the flatness of the picture plane. In Rothko’s works, Marion states, the visible finds itself crushed *into* the picture plane. It cannot escape from this plane except as “pure visibility.”<sup>22</sup> The aesthetic principles of a certain high modernism will not allow Rothko to retreat from that flat surface, will not permit the painter to invoke the invisible.<sup>23</sup> What is more, modernism cuts Rothko off from the figure and therefore from that all-important element of the icon, the face.<sup>23</sup> Modernism’s abiding suspicion of illusion and depth means that Rothko will have to do violence to the face by “enframing it in the flatness of the painting.” This will amount to condemning it “to death in the idol.” To subject the face to the distortions of the pictorial would mean depriving it of the invisible, of the transcendent exchange of undepicted gazes and thus turning the icon into its mere shell, the idol. For Marion, Rothko was presented with an excruciating choice: either he disfigure the face by painting it, or he sacrifice himself and his own spiritual ambition by refusing to do so. Marion, who argues that Rothko mutilated himself in order to save both the face and the human,<sup>24</sup> is therefore claiming that Rothko’s ultimate suicide arose out of an impossible conflict between ethics and aesthetics. In the end, Rothko chose to kill himself rather than “kill” the face. (This last expression, please note, is Marion’s.)<sup>25</sup> Marion thus sets Rothko up as a tragic hero. Rothko’s last paintings—the glowering dark canvases of the de Menil Chapel in Houston—are caught between the immanence of

20 *In Excess* 74.

21 *Ibid.* 75.

22 *Ibid.* 75.

23 *Ibid.* 77.

24 *Ibid.* 78–9.

<sup>16</sup> *The Crossing of the Visible* 60–1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 20.

<sup>18</sup> *See God Without Being* 227n.

<sup>19</sup> See, for instance, *The Crossing of the Visible* 64–5.

the idol and the desire to transcendence. They register "the claim of the other" through their subtle variations of color and light. And they signal the futility of their desire to truly respond to that claim because they show that "access to the icon is closed up."<sup>25</sup> ¶ Why is the icon no longer accessible? Marion could argue that Rothko, because he was a Jew, would be unable to paint an icon. Similarly, one might suspect—following and perhaps misreading a hint of Marion's—that the ecumenical setting of the Menil Chapel, by its exclusion of the Eucharist, and thus of "the risen Face,"<sup>26</sup> would ensure that Rothko's paintings could never be icons. ¶ But the icon's contemporary inaccessibility is not merely a question of local conditions. Marion clearly argues that the rules of modernism ensure that the face itself will lie crammed on the surface of the picture plane. And even if we take "face" here as a metaphor (which Marion apparently does not), we can see that, because they are deprived of depth, and thus, of all traces of the invisible and the transcendent, modernist paintings can only represent facades, not faces. So no matter how you understand the "face," the regime of the modern renders the icon inaccessible. ¶ Modern painting is frozen in immanence. It therefore cannot serve religious needs. Because of this, an odd reversal takes place. Kitschy popular religious merchandise proves superior to the products of the art world. In front of a Virgin by Raphael, Marion tells us, you are more interested in the painter than the Virgin. In front of a nondescript, popular devotional work, you are more likely to recognize the Virgin herself. Twentieth-century religious art is "bankrupt" for precisely this reason. Chapels by modern masters "celebrate their painters, not the addressee [of prayer]—they play the role of simple idols, not icons."<sup>27</sup> So, even in a blatantly religious context, modern art will call too much attention to itself, its surfaces and its making and thus fail to achieve the self-improvement of the image that the icon requires. ¶ Why does modern art do this? Why is it so willing to cede religion to kitsch? It is

<sup>25</sup> *In Excess* 80.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 81.

<sup>27</sup> *The Crossing of the Visible* 64.

certainly easy to moralize Marion's account and see modernism as a form of willful selfishness. Its self-referentiality thus becomes nothing more than a kind of atheistic narcissism. But the rules of modern art on which Marion bases his explanation of Rothko's catastrophe—the Greenberg-Hoffman insistence on the flatness of the picture plane—do not lend themselves so easily to moral allegory. And they raise the all-important (and surely *prior*) issue of why modern art would seek such rules in the first place.<sup>28</sup> Another way of raising this objection would be to wonder if it really makes any sense to talk about high art—a rather complicated social institution—as if it were an individual person who just happens to have lost his faith. Might it not make more sense to recast the issue in broader terms so as to escape this perhaps unwitting anthropomorphism? While it certainly is a cliché of classical sociology that we live in an increasingly disenchanted and secularized world, this does not mean that the cliché is not true. Perhaps it is precisely this process of disenchantment and secularization that has blocked the modern artist's access to the icon. If so, this will have important implications for Marion's discussion of modernism. ¶ The terms "secularization" and "disenchantment" are of course Weber's. Though they are often taken as synonyms, they should not be:

Whereas the disenchantment of the world alludes to the ancestral fight waged by religion against magic, with one of its most efficient and recurrent manifestations being the persecution of sorcerers and witches by prophets and hierocrats . . . secularization . . . immerses us in cultural modernity's battle against religious power itself, defining as its empirical manifestation in the modern world the decline of religion as a force *in temporalibus*, its *disestablishment*, its retirement from the state, the reduction of its cultural value and dismissal/liberation from its function of social integration.<sup>29</sup>

Secularization comes rather late in history and refers not to the rationalization of religion itself, but, as this quotation says,

<sup>28</sup> And we might want to apply a little more pressure to the commodity nature of religious kitsch than Marion does.

<sup>29</sup> Antonio Flavio Pierucci, "Secularization in Max Weber: On Current Usefulness of Re-Accessing that Old Meaning," *Brazilian Review of Social Sciences*, Special Issue 3 (October 2000) 137.

its disestablishment, its forced separation from politics. For our purposes, secularization's most important achievement lies in the fact that it deprives religion of its function of enforcing social integration. That is not to say that religion has lost its importance, but rather that it has been divested of its "its character of objective, all-comprising validity, its supra-individual binding force."<sup>30</sup> Once religion ceases to provide the implicit norms and references on which all members of a society can be said to agree, it becomes a topic of open discussion and debate. It moves into the foreground where it can be questioned.¶ It is in this sense that we can say that faith has become private. Deprived of its general validity, religion has been thrust back on the individual, to be tested on each person's pulse. While churches may stand in the public square, membership is not mandatory. We have a choice between denominations and we are free not to join at all. In a real and enduring way, then, religion in the West *has* become a deeply subjective, individual matter.¶ The implications of this secularization and privatization of religion are far-reaching. To put the matter in the shorthand of professional jargon: in a secularized world, religion becomes just another social subsystem in a complicated constellation of more or less autonomous subsystems, like art. And because of this, religion is no longer in a position to dictate directly to art. Nor is art in any position to dictate to religion. Their relative autonomy allows each of them to develop complicated rules and institutions. The rules for the realm of autonomous art, with its emphasis on style, on signature and on surface event, will by their very definition be different from those of religion *per se* and from those of individual religions. And because of this difference, autonomous art, as it develops in its own direction, can no longer directly and subversively fulfill the purposes of religion, nor of what James Elkins calls "straightforward, ordinarily religious faith."<sup>32</sup> And so religious merchandise, created according to the regulations and needs of specific sects, will serve those needs and

those regulations more efficiently. The "bankruptcy" of modern religious art, as Marion puts it, is in fact a sign of how well differentiated the systems of art and religion have become. Modern art and modern religion are separate and they are jealous of their freedoms and prerogatives.¶ This situation means that it will not do to limit the term religious art to devotional works. Religious art will have to be defined more broadly, as art with discernibly religious content, art that takes religion seriously as its theme. Religion becomes less "straightforward" once it is mediated through modern art, but that should not lead us to the false assumption that modern art will of necessity be either nonreligious or anti-religious. We have plenty of evidence of Rothko's religious aspirations. Newman's titles more often than not are meant to invoke religious experience. Reinhardt's late recourse to the language of negative theology and his late recourse to the motif of the Greek cross are more complicated, perhaps, but nonetheless equally open to valid religious interpretation.¶ More recently, of course, we could point to the scandalous example of Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*. Its superficially blasphemous title is undercut—or transformed—by the sheer prettiness of its Symbolist presentation. The artist's urine might be a lowly medium through which to view a crucifix, but it is transfigured by the beauty of the photograph itself. This transfiguration—which is part of the aesthetic experience the picture proposes—is not merely aesthetic. It has religious implications as well. Through the aesthetic moment, it enacts the paradox of Christ's *kenosis*: his exaltation through his abasement and his sacrifice.<sup>33</sup> And this religious paradox reflects on the aesthetic judgment that revealed it in the first place. The shock of the title and the shock that the title could be transfigured by the image give an unexpected edge to a picture which always looks as if it is about to succumb to a kitschy delectation. If you actually look at *Piss Christ* and see the way the title and the image constantly react against each other it is hard to treat it as *anything but* serious

<sup>33</sup> See Philippians 2:5–11: *Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth; And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

<sup>30</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Theses Upon Art and Religion Today," *Notes to Literature II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) 293. This essay, from 1942, was originally written in English.

<sup>31</sup> Religion has therefore come to occupy a structural position similar to art. Where religion is validated by the subjective experience we call faith, art depends on equally subjective judgments of taste. Faith and taste are remarkable in that they both tender universal claims (about truth or about beauty) which, at the same time, do not allow for universal verification.

<sup>32</sup> *On the Strange Place of Religion in Contemporary Art* 47.



34 Marion suggests a similar notion in his summary of the argument in *God Without Being*. *Being*, he tells us, is a conceptual idol. By forcing God into the straitjacket of Being, we are blinded to His true transcendence. But once we realize that Being is an idol, once we become self-conscious in this way, we can suspend our enthrallment and thus open up two new ways/attitudes which will give us access to the Other: vanity and charity. Charity, though, is beyond us: it belongs to God. So we are left with a sense of the world's vanity. This sense, which renders the enchantments of immanence as nothing, opens us, through negation, to a form of transcendence: "As love, however, remains essentially inaccessible to us, the suspension that delivers God from Being becomes feasible for us only in its negative aspect, the vanity that melancholy pours over the world of

religious art.¶ If my reading of *Piss Christ* is credible—and my impression is that it is not only credible, but common—then it should be clear that limiting religious art to icons makes little sense. Idols can have legitimate religious import too. It should also be clear that the transcendence that I am claiming for Serrano's photograph is different from the transcendence that Marion ascribes to the icon's doubled and invisible gaze. The transcendence we can discover in Serrano (or in Rothko, or in Newman, etc., etc.) derives from a negation of the immanent, the artwork's pointing beyond itself through its own act of self-criticism.<sup>34</sup> Marion is willing to accept as legitimately religious this kind of aesthetic self-negation in works from the Christian past:

That not a single image claims self-sufficiency, but rather returns itself to an Other—this can be accomplished in a number of ways: either by digging the visible screen from a counter-gaze found to be invisible (as in "the icons" . . . ); or by diverting light, outside of its function of illuminating the present, towards the summons of the Infinite . . . (Rubens . . . ) or by employing shadows and lights not to confirm the visible shapes but rather to confound and disrupt for the sake of the undecidable appearance of the invisible Spirit . . . (Caravaggio. . . ) More could be said about other, similar devices, but of particular importance is their common trait: that the prestige of the image or the visible object impoverishes itself, imposing limits on itself so that the veneration is brought back not to itself, the image, but rather to the prototype, possibly aimed at through it.<sup>35</sup>

In this quotation, even paintings that cannot count as icons in either the traditional sense or in Marion's more idealized conception (such as the work of Caravaggio and Rubens) can stand as religious art because they can negate their autonomy as images. They can undercut themselves, as it were, from within.¶ So why not Rothko? Why does Marion not search for signs of self-negation in Rothko's late works? My guess is that Marion would argue that the problem lies with history as much as faith. After all, Marion assumes, not without reason, that modernism

is chiefly concerned with surfaces and the formal limits of the picture plane. He shows how modern art is phenomenologically significant because it brings visibility quite literally to the surface. But Marion ignores that other salient feature of the self-definition of the modern, especially of its avant-garde: its constant drive towards more complete self-criticism. This drive plays itself out not only in the way individual works critique their predecessors and their contemporaries, but also in the way they undermine themselves through internal negations and dissonances. Rothko himself saw this as the "modern ingredient" in the production of a work of art: "Irony . . . the self effacement and examination by which a man for an instant can go on to something else."<sup>36</sup> Much could be made of the way the late Rothko's indeterminacies depict both intimations and blockages, presences and aching absences. Marion, however, is too intent on limiting Rothko's works to the immanence of the visible to show how, at different moments, the surfaces of Rothko's late paintings show different aspects that work against—and beyond—each other.¶ It could be argued against me here that these works are too abstract and too subjective to be called religious. I do not think Marion would pursue the first point. He is more than willing to see real human content in the dark concentrations of the Rothko Chapel. I would not be surprised if he did stand by the second one, though. His interests are theological not sociological, and the privatization of religion might not seem to him to be anything more than a historical contingency and an unfortunate one at that.¶ But—and here is my basic argument—the strict opposition that Marion wants to maintain between idol and icon, which makes perfect sense theologically, loses its explanatory power in the face of the historical and sociological conditions of modern—not to mention contemporary—art. It is clear that icons—or devotional images—are no longer plausible in the art world. But that is not merely a result of a fascination with the picture plane. Rather, the Greenberg-Hoffman ideology of flatness is an outgrowth of

beings. . . even he who does not love experiences more than nothing in this disaster; he experiences vanity through melancholy. He experiences the irreducibility of love, by default. In short, melancholy opens (to) distance."

The argument that the universal reach of ennui undoes the self-sufficiency of the merely existent and thus acts as a radical critique of immanence should be familiar to anyone who has read the last pages of Walter Benjamin's *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, although, to be sure, Benjamin does not imagine love shining through at the end of his story. In any event, Marion does seem to argue negatively/ dialectically towards transcendence here. See *God Without Being* 3.

35 *The Crossing of the Visible* 63.

36 Quoted in James E.B. Breslin, *Mark Rothko: A Biography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 390.

37 Marion wants phenomenology to make good on its original promises so that it can open the way to a justifiable metaphysics. His critique of philosophy thus leads straight to the threshold of theology. But he claims that it should cross over to the other side. Philosophy, which deals in possibilities in general, can show in general that religion is legitimate, can mark out the place of the transcendent, but philosophy cannot say a word about its specific content: "Between phenomenology and theology the border passes between revelation as possibility and revelation as historicity." Theology, therefore, stands to a certain degree as the necessary supplement of philosophy. It contains the truth of specific revelation that philosophy lacks but requires philosophy to establish and reiterate its legitimacy. See Jean-Luc Marion, "Metaphysics and Phenomenology: A Relief for Theology," trans. Thomas A. Carlson, *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Summer 1994): 590.

the art world's increasing autonomy. And autonomy is the crucial element that Marion tends to finesse. One of the distinguishing features of autonomous art is that it is allergic to meanings that are imposed dogmatically from the outside, precisely because its autonomy depends on its difference from that outside. This means, of course, that for over a century now, devotional works have rarely been counted as autonomous art. Marion freely acknowledges the generally low quality of modern and contemporary devotional painting. It is kitschy for good reason, and this reason is historical. It does not necessarily follow from the divorce of devotion from art that autonomous art will either be nonreligious or actively opposed to religion. There is no reason why autonomous art cannot or will not take religion seriously as a theme. And there is no reason to ignore modernist painting's insistent exploration and negation of its immanence. ¶ In the end, because he is a sensitive reader of modernism, Marion has noticed something important about art of the last 150 years and about the autonomous art world that has produced it. But because he wants to limit his notion of properly religious art to devotional works, he is blind to the legitimately religious content of artworks that would not necessarily fit into a denominational chapel. And the word "chapel" here merits some interrogation. While his phenomenology tries very hard to be open to religion without being sectarian,<sup>37</sup> Marion's opposition between the idol and the icon—and Marion's stress on the importance of the mediating devotional images in the first place—is of course Christian from the get-go and Catholic in its specific instances. Other religions cannot really fill that space that Marion's philosophy holds open for them. Judaism does not use icons. It abhors them, as does Islam. Given all this, perhaps we can say that the place of religion in contemporary art is broader, and perhaps even stranger, than most of us might first imagine.

*In memory of Pearl Ehrlich*